DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 571 SP 034 987

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TITLE Rehabilitation Counseling for Athletes Prior to Retirement: A Preventative Approach Using Self-Acceptance To Enhance Performance before and after Retirement.
PUB DATE 29 Nov 93
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Anxiety; *Athletes; Athletic Coaches; Cognitive Processes; *Counseling Services; *Counseling Techniques; Higher Education; Models; Performance Factors; *Preretirement Education; Psychological Patterns; *Retirement; Self Concept; *Self Esteem; Self Evaluation (Individuals)

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that collegiate and professional athletes preparing to retire should be provided with preretirement and postretirement rehabilitation counseling. The counseling should involve a preventative approach centered around self-acceptance, to enhance the athlete's performance before and after retirement. The development of self-acceptance in an athlete helps him or her to experience less competitive cognitive anxiety. A model for performance enhancement links self-acceptance to cognitive anxiety and cognitive anxiety to performance. Questions are presented that athletes can ask themselves to examine their level of self-acceptance and that coaches can ask themselves to determine their enhancement of athletes' self-acceptance. The issue of retirement for professional athletes is compared to the psychological stages of someone who is dying. These stages include denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Counseling an athlete as he or she goes through these stages involves listening/confrontation, cognitive therapy, and vocational guidance. Counselors are encouraged to provide empathy and support, break the problem into manageable parts and develop a plan to tackle those parts, and determine the athlete's internal and external strengths and resources. An appendix presents a self-concept diagram. (Contains 12 references.) (JDD)

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ED 366 571

Rehabilitation Counseling for Athletes Prior to Retirement: A Preventative Approach Using Self-Acceptance to Enhance Performance Before and After Retirement.

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issue of retirement and how it is becoming a major issue in both collegiate and professional athletics regardless of why the athlete must retire. This paper suggests that rehabilitation counseling should consist of pre- and post-counseling. A preventative approach centered around self-acceptance is a proposed solution that would inevitably enhance an athletes performance before and after their retirement, and examining self-acceptance prior to retirement may ease the transition. Suggestions for intervention and counseling, and future research and directions are also discussed.

Rehabilitation Counseling for Athletes Prior to Retirement: A Preventative Approach Using Self-Acceptance to Enhance Performance Before and After Retirement.

The issue of retirement is becoming a major issue in both collegiate and professional athletics regardless of why the athlete must retire. A majority of the research involving the retirement of athletes centers around rehabilitating an athlete after the retirement has occurred. This paper suggests that rehabilitation counseling should consist of pre- and post-counseling based on the fact that all athletes must retire at some point. A preventative approach centered around self-acceptance is a proposed solution that would inevitably enhance an athletes performance before and after their retirement, and examining self-acceptance prior to retirement may ease the transition.

So often, we tell our athletes how important the outcome of a certain match or competition is to the team, to us as coaches, and how important it should be to the athletes themselves. Little do we know that the amount of "importance" that an athlete places on an

event can be far greater than what we expected. But what does perceived "importance" have to do with mental health and performance? This paper is an attempt to relate certain aspects of an athlete's self-concept to their cognitive anxiety and to other performance. As a result, a hypothetical model for a mentally healthy approach to performance will be suggested. This paper is not attempting to present the answer to the self-concept/performance relationship, but it is an attempt to create a better understanding of the possibility of a "mental health" approach to performance enhancement. Taking this concept and examining it in relation to sport performance and competitive cognitive anxiety[1] opens many new possibilities relating performance and mental health.

For example, what does victory or defeat mean to your athlete? Is the outcome of the event (win/loss) associated with his/her feelings of personal worth and value as a human being (i.e., are they less self-accepting)? For some athletes, their identity as an athlete is tied to their feelings of self-worth. In other words, this means their success and failure as an athlete is related to their perceived worth and value

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[1] Worry and apprehension associated with competition.

as human beings. It is very hard for these athletes to value and feel good about themselves unconditionally. These meanings encoded in the victories or defeat are often related to the athlete's self-concept[2], and more specifically their level of self-acceptance[3].

Sport is the type of environment replete with evaluative experiences. Given the evaluative nature of self-acceptance, self-accepting athletes may experience less competitive cognitive anxiety than non self-accepting athletes. They have a sense of inherent self-worth just because they are human and exist (Branden, 1983). Given the security that accompanies maintaining their self-worth and value as a human being, self-accepting athletes may experience less anxiety, more trust and confidence and less fear of failure than less self-accepting athletes. As a result, they may also tend to perform better.

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[2] The way in which an individual feels about him or herself (Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton, 1976).

[3] Sport-specific self-acceptance, defined as valuing and feeling good about one's self regardless of one's shortcomings and failures as an athlete (Waite, Gansneder, & Rotella, 1990), is a dimension of self-concept that is relatively unknown to the sporting world. Sport-specific self-acceptance is a concept adopted from psychology and the likes of Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Albert Ellis. Outside of the sporting arena it is often recognized in relation to self-esteem.

The "self" investment (self-worth involvement) an athlete makes with performance indirectly relates to performance by directly relating to cognitive anxiety.

Self-Acceptance ---> Cognitive Anxiety ---> Performance.

Cognitive anxiety can be described as a "right now" reaction to a situation that threatens one's self-esteem[4] (Speilberger, 1966). Cognitive anxiety can also be heightened when a sense of loss is related to the loss of self-worth (Scanlon, 1984). Numerous research studies provide evidence that worry and apprehension (cognitive anxiety) are a major hindrance to athletic performance (Gill, 1986; Taylor, 1987).

Scanlon (1984) suggests that it is not defeat itself that is so stress inducing. It is the complete failure that a loss represents when the only valued criterion for success is victory. In other words, it is the meaning or representation that the individual gives to the outcome of defeat that is the major source of stress (cognitive anxiety). The more important an event or achievement is for an athlete (i.e., movement

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[4] Valuing and feeling good about yourself based upon achievements and success (Waite, Gansneder, & Rotella, 1990). Self-concept, self-esteem and self-acceptance are all interrelated.

toward equating success in that event to their perceived self-worth) the greater chance for increase in perceived anxiety. Athletes who relate winning to perceived self-worth can feel emotionally and cognitively threatened.

Unfortunately, motivation by fear is one of the strongest motivators known. Fear of failure due to ego threat (loss of self-worth) is an example of this. Research in progress examining collegiate swimmers hypothesizes that there is a negative relationship between cognitive anxiety and self-acceptance, a weak positive relationship between self-acceptance and performance (Hurley, 1993). Findings will provide more information and empirical evidence for the theoretical position that self-accepting athletes perform better due to lower cognitive anxiety (i.e., less fear of failure, greater trust, etc.).

A model for performance enhancement is thus developed by theoretically linking self-acceptance to cognitive anxiety, and empirically and theoretically linking cognitive anxiety to performance. It seems to make logical sense that these athletes who are more self-accepting will have less fear of failure and thus more self-trust. "Trusting"--also described as "being in the zone", or "flowing"--is related to peak

performances (Moore, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Once these athletes believe and feel that they have a strong sense of self-worth, regardless of their failures and shortcomings (self-acceptance), they will be more apt to take risks by moving out of their "comfort zone".

No individual is either completely self-accepting or completely self-esteeming. A healthy combination of the two is more common. We often hear and speak about ways to build self-esteem (valuing and feeling good about yourself based on achievements and successes [Waite et al., 1990]), but very little on how to build or enhance self-acceptance. This is partly due to the previous lack of understanding about the importance and the dynamics of self-acceptance.

Suggestions for Intervention/Counseling

Beginning With Questions

The author has developed several questions that you, as a counselor, can encourage coaches to ask themselves that will help stimulate thought and give some ideas about promoting a self-accepting atmosphere for individual athletes. The author has also developed some questions that you, as a counselor, can encourage athletes to ask themselves that may facilitate a better

understanding of the level of self-accepting behavior of the athlete.

Encourage coaches to ask themselves:

1. Do I motivate my athletes using fear?
2. When critiquing an athlete's performance, do I focus on the performance (a specific behavior) or do I place a value judgement on the athlete?
3. Are all of my team and individual goals outcome oriented or process oriented?
4. Have I ever implied to my athletes that they are worthless? Have I ever implied this even after my most frustrating moments as a coach?
5. Is there enough trust between the athletes and myself for them to feel that they can take personal risks?
6. How do I treat my athlete(s) after constant mistakes/errors, a career ending injury, upon quitting the team, retirement, or being cut from the team?

Encourage athletes to ask themselves:

1. How do I feel about myself after winning/losing?
2. What is my main source of motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic)?

3. Do I "have" to win or "always" do my best to feel good about myself?
4. Without using any words that directly characterize yourself as an athlete, describe yourself in as much detail as possible.
5. How would you feel about yourself, as a person, if you could no lor ,er be an athlete?

Theory Based Intervention

Wolff and Lester's (1989) article on counseling the retired athlete is a proposed theoretical basis for counseling the retired professional athlete. Wolff and Lester (1989) address the issue of retirement for professional athletes as a comparison to the process of dying. Wolff and Lester (1989) argue that when a professional athlete goes through the process of retirement they may go through similar psychological stages of that described by Kubler-Ross (1969).

Kubler-Ross (1969) defines five stages that each individual confronts before the realization of death and dying is accepted (accepted as much as humanly possible). Once the individual is confronted with the knowledge of a terminal illness the most common first response or first stage is denial and isolation. The terminally ill patient will deny their fate by not

acknowledging it, and tend to become very isolated from friends and family. As a friend or family member it is difficult to understand this isolation especially when your first reaction is often empathy and consolation.

Once it dawns on the individual that this is indeed happening to them the response is often one of anger. "Why is this happening to me?", is a common question and anger is the normal response. As friends and family come into contact with this severe anger it is sometimes difficult to handle, and can cause anger with the friends and family of the terminally ill. Along with the anger the terminally ill will undergo a brief stage were they begin to bargain with a spiritual figure of their belief. They begin to acknowledge their fate, but still feel there is some way out if a bargain can be arranged.

As time progresses and the treatments and the effects of the illness persist, anger is then replaced with great depression. The debilitation of health, the decrease in activity, and loss of energy becomes very depressing to an individual especially an athlete who is forced to lead a less active lifestyle.

If the individual does not meet with a sudden death, and has been able to work through the first four stages then they will eventually reach a stage of

acceptance. The acceptance stage is not a "giving up" stage but rather "the final rest before the long journey" (Kubler-Ross, 1969), as one terminally ill patient phrased it.

Wolff and Lester (1989) propose a three stage counseling process to confront these possible debilitating psychological stages:
1. listening/confrontation, 2. cognitive therapy, 3. vocational guidance. Wolff and Lester's (1989) process was designed to be a proposal of a theoretical construct for counseling retired professional athletes. Comparing the psychological stages of retiring for professional athletes to Kubler-Ross's (1969) stages of dying is a very accurate comparison. When the professional athlete retires it is an extremely difficult adjustment period that can end tragically unless athletes receive rehabilitation counseling, and ideally have prepared for their inevitable departure from athletics prior to retirement. Thus my proposal for a preventative model for retiring athletes centered around self-acceptance.

Understanding the concept of self-acceptance and how it relates to performance during and after an athletes career allows counselors to begin the rehabilitation process in a more preventive manner

(before retirement) in conjunction with enhancing an athletes performance prior to retirement. Once an athlete has been able to effectively use self-acceptance to enhance their performance on the field the athlete can use these same skills for enhancing performance off the field. These skills will also assist the athlete in their adjustment period after retirement from athletics. The following are some guidelines for intervention to help the counselor assist an athlete in their adjustment period after retirement:

1. Provide empathy and support.
2. Demonstrate genuine interest, concern and caring.
3. Determine the nature and complexity of the problem.
4. (Help) to understand the immediate problem in a clear, concise way.
5. (Help) to break the problem into manageable parts.
6. (Help) develop a plan to tackle a manageable part of the problem.
7. Determine the internal and external strengths and resources.
8. Marshal strengths and resources.

This is a difficult undertaking for any counselor, but a basic understanding of your athlete (faced with retirement), and a systematic approach to dealing with the emotional issues is an excellent approach. Communication, sensitivity, trust, and an understanding that all athletes deal with retirement in their own way, are essential elements in dealing with a problem of this nature.

Future Research/Directions

The issue I feel is most important for the future of self-acceptance as a preventive tool for retiring athletes is an understanding of the basic construct of self-acceptance, and how it is related to the constructs of self-esteem and self-concept (see Appendix A). The second most important issue is continued research in the area of self-acceptance and how it relates to athletes adjustment to retirement. Very little research has been done in this area therefore continued research may generate a stronger theory based approach. The third issue of concern would be to examine the issues of retirement prior to retirement, and develop a more preventive approach to dealing with retirement.

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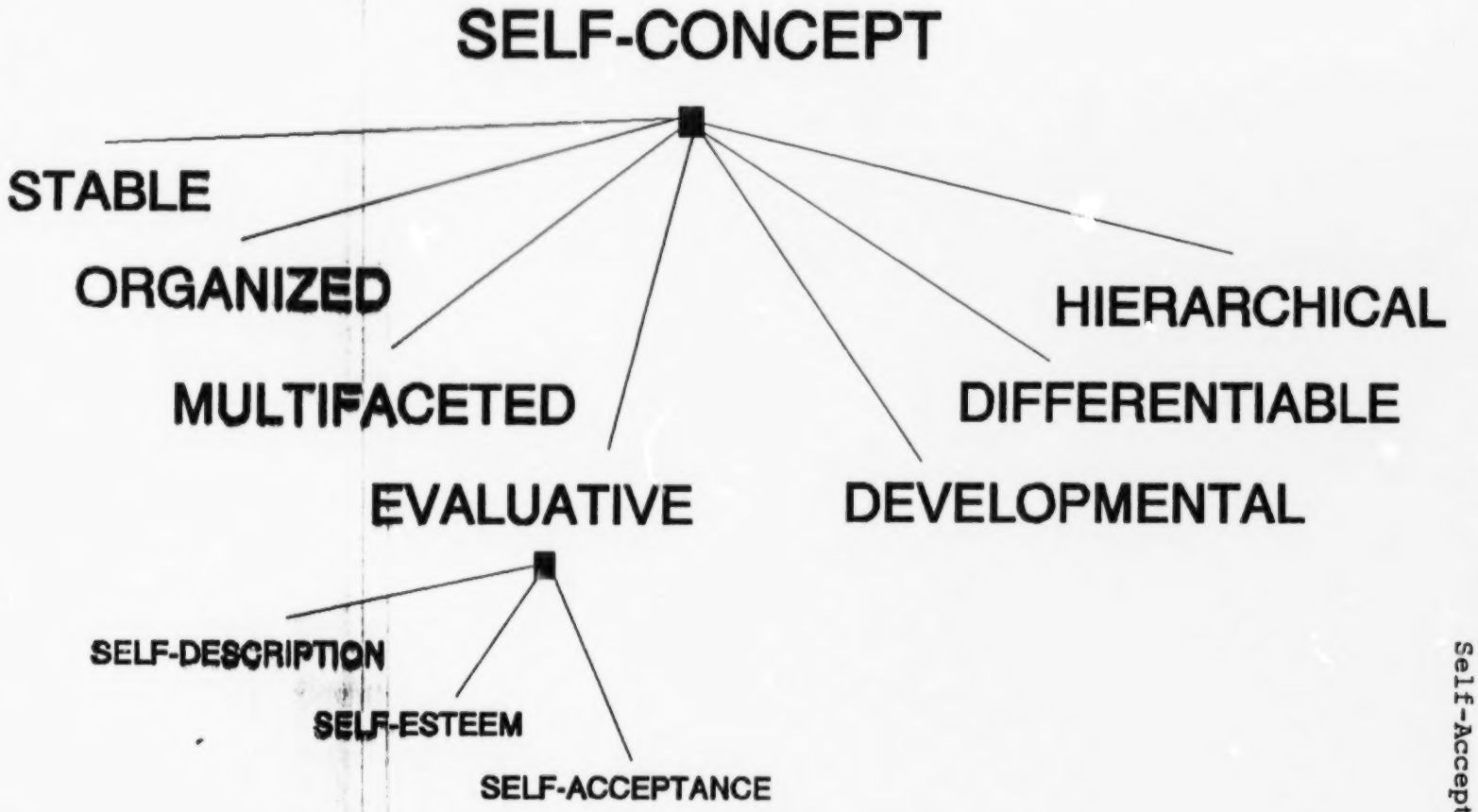
APPENDIX A

Self-Concept Diagram



Adapted from: Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, (1976).

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